



A Home Away From Home

Drop-In Centre Building a Community, One Youth at a Time

By Jamie Monastyrski

Peter Panetta has a very large family. His family includes everyone who walks through the doors of the Underground Gym in Thunder Bay's rough-and-tumble south side. They are all youth, aged four years to late teens. They visit the drop-in centre to participate in gym activities, take part in day trips, have a bite to eat, build friendships, and just hang out and feel like part of a family. "He's an angel," says a local resident who wanted to remain anonymous. "Peter helps these kids who don't have any other place to go. He gives them a safe place to go and they are off the streets where they can get into trouble pretty easy."

"I like coming here. I have been coming here for four years," says Markus, a talkative 12-year-old boy from the neighbourhood. "There's a lot to do always and we get to do cool stuff and I can have supper here." For the neighbourhood youth, there is no other place to go on a rainy Saturday afternoon. The Underground Gym has

been around for 15 years, and it offers not only a place for these youth to gather and mingle but a place where they gain a sense of belonging they might not get elsewhere.

On an average Saturday afternoon there are more than 30 young people playing pool, tinkering on the piano, drawing pictures, and sitting around the kitchen chatting. "We have bonded into a family," Panetta says proudly. "I love the kids and the kids love being here. Once you are a member, you are a member for life."

The retired Canada Post worker opened the Underground Gym more than 15 years ago. He purchased the buildings on Simpson Street for a song at a city auction. Nobody else bid on the property because the buildings were in disrepair and when the neighbourhood residents and local contractors knew the buildings would be renovated to host a youth centre, they volunteered their time and expertise and helped bring the buildings up to code in less than a year. Panetta's experience and his passion

to work with youth in the neighbourhood fueled his dream to establish a centre where kids could feel safe, enjoy themselves, and learn self-worth. "Whether it's swimming, arts, fitness or going on outings, it's all about providing opportunities that they otherwise may not have," Panetta says.

Though the centre functions without government or corporate support, it manages to operate on a month-to-month basis with donations from city residents and fund-raisers. The Underground Gym is a registered charity and Panetta says that some organizations and companies donate time, admission fees, and equipment for the youth. However, he often has to pay fees from his shoe-string budget.

Brianne, a 15-year-old who helps out around the centre and has been involved for three years, says it is more than a drop-in for the youth around the neighbourhood. "I can get away from everything here. It keeps me out of trouble and it's like another home to me."

The Underground Gym welcomes donations of gently used fitness equipment, food for their kitchen, and funds to help cover operating costs (tax receipts provided). Volunteers to donate their services to teach art, photography, fitness, music and cooking are also appreciated. For more information or make a donation, call 622-5666, email underground-gym@tbaytel.net, or visit undergroundgym.ca.

Holiday Wish List for the Youth at the Underground Gym

Individual gift packs including any combination of these personal items:

- Socks
- Hats
- Mitts
- Toothpaste
- Toothbrushes
- Hairbrushes
- Fruit
- Treats